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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007745

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: FRENCH-IRAQI RESEARCHER DESCRIBES RECENT RAMADAN
VISIT TO QOM, CONTACTS WITH SISTANI REPRESENTATIVES

REF: PARIS 7675

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: A local French-Iraqi anthropologist, Hosham Dawod (protect), briefed us on a recent visit to Qom, Iran, reportedly at the invitation of supporters of Ayatollah Sistani. Dawod, who is a former IVLP participant and an expert on Iraqi tribes and Shi'ism, told us he spent 12 days in Qom as the guest of Sayyid Jawad Sharistani, an in-law of Ayatollah Sistani, who reportedly acts as a go-between Sistani and the senior Iranian leadership. Dawod described Ayatollah Sistani as having a large clerical base of support in Qom, and attracting more popular support in Qom than partisans of Supreme Leader Khamenei. Dawod described an intense internal debate and shifting rivalries in the wake of Iran's recent presidential election, based on what he observed in Qom. Dawod viewed Supreme Leader Khamenei's influence as weakened by supporters of Iranian President Ahmadinejad, whom he described as a follower of rival, hard-line Qom-based Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi. At the same time, Dawod described a negative popular reaction in Qom to President Ahmadinejad's threats "to wipe Israel off the map," which were viewed locally as contributing to Iran's isolation. Dawod asserted that VOA appeared to be a preferred source of news for the Iranians he met in Qom, and that VOA could be an important tool in persuading the Iranian public that intransigence on the nuclear issue would only further Iran's isolation and erode modest openings secured in recent years. End summary.

2. (C) Poloff met recently with French-Iraqi anthropologist Hosham Dawod, upon his return from a 12-day visit to Qom, Iran. (Comment: Dawod is an established embassy contact and a noted French expert on Iraqi tribes and Shi'ism, based at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). He fled Iraq under Saddam's regime as a teenager, before eventually settling and pursuing graduate studies in France, where he obtained French nationality. He is a Shi'a Kurd, secular and left-leaning in outlook, and does not appear to support a particular political camp in Iraq. Dawod participated in an IVLP program to the U.S. in April 2005. End comment.) Dawod reported that he visited Iran at the invitation of Jawad Sharistani, whom he described as a Qom-based representative and in-law of Ayatollah Sistani. Dawod described Jawad as a cousin of Iraqi National Assembly Deputy Speaker Husayn al-Sharistani but more important than his Iraq-based cousin, given Jawad's reported access to the highest levels of the Iranian leadership, including Supreme Leader Khamenei. Dawod told us he established contact with Jawad Sharistani during a research trip to Mecca during the hajj season earlier this year, and that Sistani's camp had expressed appreciation for Dawod's writings on Iraq. Dawod told us that during the Qom visit, Sharistani asked him to pursue a documentary project on Ayatollah Sistani, for which he offered Dawod access to Sistani's archives and family members as well as an interview with Sistani himself in Iraq. Dawod accepted the offer, which he described as a "coup" from a research perspective.

3. (C) Dawod described Sistani as having a large base of clerical support in Qom, larger than its counterpart in Iraq; he asserted that Sistani had some 1,300 "wakils" or official representatives in Iran, compared to a dozen or so in Iraq. Dawod described the Ramadan iftars hosted by Sistani's supporters in Qom as packed and better attended than those organized by supporters of Supreme Leader Khamenei, and concluded that Sistani had more popular support in Qom. He noted that Sistani's supporters were careful not to create a sense of rivalry with Iranian authorities, who were also constrained to remain hospitable to Sistani's base in Qom, despite the obvious sense of competition between Najaf and Qom for theological preeminence. At the same time, Dawod described Jawad Sharistani and other Qom-based Sistani supporters as deeply concerned by the depth of Iranian infiltration in Iraq and Iranian influence among leading Iraq Shi'a parties in Iraq, which Dawod speculated could generate friction between Sistani and the SCIRI and Dawa parties after December elections.

4. (C) Dawod said that throughout his visit to Qom, he sensed an intense internal debate taking place in the wake of election of President Ahmadinejad. Dawod described Supreme Leader Khamenei as weakened by Ahmadinejad's election, and

cited Ahmadinejad's allegiance to rival, hard-line Qom-based Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi. Dawod stressed that although Ahmadinejad continued to publicly pay deference to Khamenei, the Iranian president and his leading appointees, including FM Motaki and Supreme National Security Council Chief Ali Larijani, were "graduates" of Mesbah's religious institute in Qom. According to Dawod, although Mesbah had played a key role in drafting a theological argument for Khamenei's succession of Ayatollah Khomeini, some of his supporters in Qom were calling for Iran to have a younger Supreme Leader. Dawod opined that internal rivalries were driving shifting alliances in Iran, such as Khamenei's undermining, and more recent rehabilitation of former Iranian president Rafsanjani. Dawod cited the recent recall of Iranian ambassador to Paris Sadegh Kharazi (reftel), noting that the envoy's relations by marriage to Khamenei could not protect him from being swept aside in Ahmadinejad's wholesale dismissals of Iran's overseas representatives.

15. (C) Dawod described a negative reaction in Qom to President Ahmadinejad's public threats to "wipe Israel off the map," which he said most of his Iranian interlocutors viewed as likely to push Iran into further isolation. Dawod said one young Iranian asked him in jest why the U.S. couldn't use its satellite communications to find the fabled "hidden imam," which would mean that Iran's theocratic regime would have to step down. Dawod observed that "every taxi driver" he met and most other Iranians with whom he spoke in Qom relied on Farsi-language VOA as a preferred source of news. He commented that radio was a much more effective news medium than television in Iran, since most Iranians he met dismissed state TV entirely. Dawod concluded that despite Qom's reputation as a theocratic foothold, citizens displayed a surprising degree of openness; for example, he observed single, casually veiled women smoking shisha in cafes in Qom, an unthinkable act in neighboring Iraq. Dawod concluded that despite Iran's domestic problems, Iranians, particularly young people, had been able to carve out some openings in the past 10 years -- breathing room which they would not want to give up. He opined that VOA could be a useful tool in persuading the Iranian public that further intransigence on the nuclear issue would mean forfeiting the openings achieved in recent years; in Dawod's view, no one in Iran, except perhaps a hard-line minority, wanted to return to the isolation of 1979.

16. (C) Comment: We view Dawod as a reliable interlocutor and hope his observations are of some use to Iran and Iraq watchers in Washington. Dawod's observations on an internal debate in Iran track with what we have heard from the MFA (reftel), but he does not share the MFA's cautious approach against isolating Iran. End comment.

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